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Q&A

How did you become involved in doing research?

I became interested in this topic while enrolled in Dr. Wuthrich's capstone seminar course this semester.

How is the research process different from what you expected?

The research process is not as straightforward as I expected. I had to narrow the scope and topic of my paper significantly from the beginning of the semester.

What is your favorite part of doing research?

My favorite part of doing research is learning new things about fascinating subjects and contributing to the academic body of knowledge.

"I Don't Want to Grow Old and Weak Like You!": Conceptions of Idealized Masculinity in Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

Benjamin Ale-Ebrahim

ABSTRACT

Iranian women are often at the forefront of feminist discourse on gender roles in the Middle East. There can be no question that this is important work and there are many questions about feminine gender roles in the Middle East and Iran that remain unanswered. However, gender norms in this family-centered society are often shaped by their relation to the opposite sex. As such, social scientists must understand both men's and women's roles in order to gain an appreciation for the complexity of social dynamics in a predominantly gender-segregated country like Iran. While most literature on the subject of gender in Iranian cinema focuses on women, little has been written explicitly about men and masculinity. This paper will attempt to close some of the gaps in this research by contrasting the category of the "ideal Iranian man" in popular films from two major periods in Iranian cinema—the highly Westernized era of the 1960s and 70s and the politically Islamist era of the 1980s and early 90s. Just as the nature of the Iranian national consciousness underwent a drastic change following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, so too did the nature of Iranian gender norms. By analyzing two films each from the pre- and post-revolutionary eras using three important variables—class conflict and religious piety, male-female sexual dynamics, and age differences among men—I will trace the path of these changes and suggest reasons for the similarities and differences one can observe between pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian films.

INTRODUCTION

Iranian women are often at the forefront of feminist discourse on gender roles in the Middle East, and for good reason. As the more obviously “gendered” half of the population, questions abound regarding women’s social status, women’s representations in the media, and women’s roles in constructing national consciousness. There can be no question that this is important work and there are many questions about feminine gender roles in the Middle East and Iran that remain unanswered. However, due to predominantly patriarchal social norms prevalent in the region, women in Iran do not enjoy many of the same rights and privileges that their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons do. Gender norms in this family-centered society are often shaped by their relation to the opposite sex. As such, social scientists must understand both men’s and women’s roles in order to gain an appreciation for the complexity of social dynamics in a predominantly gender-segregated country like Iran.

While most literature on the subject of gender in Iranian cinema focuses on women, little has been written explicitly about men and masculinity. This paper will attempt to close some of the gaps in this research by contrasting the category of the “ideal Iranian man” in popular films from two major periods in Iranian cinema—the highly Westernized pre-revolutionary era of the 1960s and 70s and the staunchly reactionary and politically Islamist post-revolutionary era of the 1980s and early 90s. Just as the nature of the Iranian national consciousness underwent a drastic change following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, so too did the nature of Iranian gender norms. By analyzing two films each from the pre- and post-revolutionary eras using three important variables—class conflict

and religious piety, male-female sexual dynamics, and age differences among men—I will trace the path of these changes and suggest reasons for the similarities and differences one can observe between pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian films.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND GAPS IN RESEARCH

Though not comprehensive, a substantial amount of research exists regarding femininity and idealized notions of womanhood in Iranian cinema. According to Hamid Naficy, women in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema can be categorized into three main “types:” female “blood relations” of male characters, who are “pure” and “virtuous;” wives of male characters, who are also pure to some extent; and “women entertainers,” who exist purely for male characters’ pleasure (2011: 289). Idealized women, the first two types in the scenario outlined above, are typically associated with the home and private spaces. Impure women of the third type are associated with public spaces, like teahouses and brothels (Naficy 2011: 289). A man has the power to remake an impure woman by marrying her or giving her his patronage. As such, women in this era of Iranian film do not possess a great deal of agency and depend heavily upon their male relatives and lovers to provide for them.

Pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema has a generally “bitter look, because most of its characters are anti-heroes, alone in a world that offers them no hope of justice” (Mirbakhtyar 2006: 98). Due to the oppressive political conditions under the Pahlavi regime, in which artists and intellectuals living in Iran were unable to voice their true opinions, the filmmakers of this period focused their narratives on “rebellious characters who were in conflict with a political order and society that denied them their basic rights” (Mirbakhtyar 2006: 99). They focus extensively on

urban-rural, class, and age conflicts as Iran slowly emerges from its traditional way of life and becomes a modern industrial nation. Iranian cinema instructs theatergoers on how to cope with this new way of life, “usually, though not always, suggesting naïve solutions” (Sadr 2006: 1). As an outlet for artistic and political expression and an instructive tool for the reigning elite, cinema in Iran would continue to influence the national consciousness in much the same way following the 1979 Islamic Revolution as it had in the late Pahlavi era.

Following the violent political upheaval at end of the 1970s, Iranian cinema “was for a time virtually extinguished” (Sadr 2006: 187). Women in Iranian films “went back under the veil” and the new regime’s censors restricted any plotlines that did not conform to “a rigid code requiring Muslim women be shown as chaste and maternal, never sexualized” (Sadr 2006: 188). The first few post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers to emerge from the confusion and chaos of the revolution were primarily concerned with creating an “Islamic cinema” (Mirbakhtyar 2006: 107-8) palatable to the ayatollahs newly in charge of the country. Once this new crop of producers and directors gained a significant amount of filmmaking skills, they began to look at cinema “more and more as a form of artistic expression, instead of viewing it strictly through the lenses of religion and ideology” (Mirbakhtyar 2006: 108). In other words, once cinema had “proven itself” as potentially beneficial to the goals of the revolutionary government, it was allowed to flourish once more—albeit within the limits of the official moral codes.

Women in the post-revolutionary era continued to be portrayed on screen as either innocent wives and mothers or corrupt degenerates (Derayeh 2010: 151). In the early years of the revolution, women were

“structurally absent” from films until the mid-1980s (Naficy 2012: 111-135). At this time, they began to gain a “background presence” until the late 1980s when women were moved into the “foreground” of Iranian cinema plotlines (Naficy 2012: 111-135). According to Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi, the compulsory veiling of Iranian women in film was intended to “control the female body and make heterosexual desire highly masculine” (2015). As women were compelled to don the veil in public spaces, including on screen, they surrendered control of their own bodies to the men in charge of public morality (Moradiyan Rizi 2015). Men continued to exercise control over Iranian women in the immediate post-revolutionary years, just as they had control over women in the late Pahlavi era.

Despite political progress toward freedom of expression and the improvement of the status of women’s rights in Iran beginning in the late 1980s, women’s portrayals in Iranian film from the 1960s through the 1980s remained defined by their subordination to men, while the two-dimensional characterization of female characters as either pure (*khaales*) or morally corrupt (*faased*) persisted. The ideal woman remains one’s mother, sister, or wife, while the street entertainer or dancer elicits no empathy, for she is merely the object of one’s carnal desires. Although the 1979 revolution changed the language and codes with which Iranian women were oppressed on screen, her oppression did not relent. Rather, the defining event that shifted representations of femininity in Iranian film did not occur with the 1979 revolution but several years later. What remains unclear is whether cinematic portrayals of Iranian men remained constant over this same time period and, if there was a thematic shift in the representation of masculinity

in Iranian film, how the men of post-revolutionary Iran compare to the men of the pre-revolutionary era. Perhaps a look at masculinity in another national film tradition can provide further context for understanding gender norms in Iranian cinema.

In their discussion of feminist literature on Hollywood cinema, Cohan and Hark write that by “concentrating on the female body as the primary stake of cinematic representation,” feminist scholarship generally ignores “the problem of masculinity that motivates the system” (1992: 1). In other words, one must study men and masculinity in order to gain a nuanced appreciation for normative gendered behavior in any patriarchal society, whether in the United States or Iran. They further argue, “the scant attention paid to the spectacle of men ends up reinforcing the apparent effacement of the masculine as a social construction in American culture” (Cohan and Hark 1992: 3). By studying the construction and negotiation of masculinity on screen, one begins to question the dominant ideal of a patriarchal society that the man is normal and undifferentiated while the woman is abnormal and secondary to men. In this paper, I will engage in a similar process in my analysis of Iranian gender norms, with a particular focus on masculinity.

Currently, there is no substantial body of literature discussing masculinity in Iranian cinema during the immediate pre- and post-revolutionary eras. As such, this paper can begin to address this neglected topic by combining previous research on feminine gender norms in Iranian cinema with analysis of masculinity in other film traditions. I lay out my theoretical framework for achieving this goal in the section below.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the years since Michel Foucault first published his monumental *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977* (1980), it has been essential to complicate such categories as gender and sexuality when analyzing cultural change. This process involves an *Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 2012) in which the researcher must investigate the history and political implications of cultural forces that construct normative behavior. This essay seeks to conduct a Foucauldian archaeology of the category of the “ideal man” in two important and contrasting eras of Iran’s cinematic history.

According to the most contemporary gender theorists, especially Judith Butler in her influential *Gender Trouble* (2002), masculinity and femininity consist of a performance in which we all engage in our daily lives, often unaware that we are simply acting in the ways we are taught within the boundaries of our cultural upbringing. It is the job of the researcher, then, to make explicit these ways of enacting gender and their limitations within any specific cultural context. This theoretical paradigm is especially useful for analysis of visual media, including film. Through content analysis, one can get at such complex notions as the definition of masculinity and manhood in Iranian society and how these definitions have changed over time.

Some studies exist that examine how masculinity is constructed in Iran and other Muslim-majority countries. Amar (2011) writes that masculinity in the Middle East is often understood in the popular Western imagination as “in crisis,” “hypersexualized,” and dangerous to the order of the state. He proposes a more nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern men in critical scholarship, conscious of the history of colonialism in the region and

of class distinctions among each society in question. As such, we can infer that the motivations and representations of upper-class Iranian men in cinematic portrayals are going to be significantly different from those of middle- and lower-class Iranian men. There exists a hierarchy of power, in which those in power—the Iranian clerics who determine media policy and prominent film producers and directors who work within politically determined boundaries—have different motivations from those they seek to influence—the Iranian theater-going public. Because of the inherent connection between Iran’s theocratic elite and film production, social class and religious piety have much to do with Iran’s conception of itself as a nation and these themes inevitably find themselves being replicated on screen.

Similarly, Bruce Dunne, in his *Power and Sexuality in the Middle East* (1998), writes that “sexual relations in Middle Eastern societies have historically articulated social hierarchies” in which men are dominant and women are submissive. One’s gender identity is traditionally inextricable from one’s sexuality. Therefore, in order to be a “real man,” one must engage in heterosexual activity—ideally, getting married and fathering children. Women are expected to be mothers, protecting the nation’s moral foundation by instilling within the next generation the ideals of the past. Men are unquestionably superior to women in this traditional framework, and manhood rests in sexual activity and virility. Both masculinity and femininity serve vital and complementary roles in maintaining the structure of the state and of devout Islamic society.

Finally, Peter Hopkins (2006) contends that there are two dominant discourses of Muslim masculinities—that of virile

aggression and that of academic effeminacy. As such, all men in a predominantly Muslim society will fall somewhere on a spectrum from the virile young man, promiscuous and womanizing, to the respected older scholar, aloof and asexual. Homosexual tendencies are, theoretically, tempered by homosociality. That is, men are encouraged to befriend one another but to seek sexual release with women, not among themselves. Generally, although older men are well respected in traditional Iranian value systems, the old man is perceived as impotent and lacking of some measure of masculinity. Younger men possess a more potent form of masculinity, dangerous in its disregard for social norms.

In this paper I intend to use these three variables, namely class differences and their relation to religious piety, male-female sexual dynamics, and age differences among men, to analyze and compare four films from the pre- and post-revolutionary eras of Iranian cinema. I will then determine whether or not the frameworks provided above can adequately explain the phenomenon of masculinity in Iranian cinema or whether they should be modified to reflect the Iranian case. This will be completed through analysis of a “typology” of Iranian masculinity, as described below.

METHODOLOGY

In this paper I will provide an archaeology of masculinity in two major periods of Iranian cinema. These two periods are: the late Pahlavi era of the 1960s and 70s, and the 1980s and early 1990s immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. I will analyze two films from each period, focusing on how masculinity is presented across the spectrum of Iranian society, its foundations in sexuality and men’s relationships with women,

and the political aspects of manhood. I will now describe my reasons for periodizing Iranian cinema in this fashion and for my choices in films to analyze.

I have chosen to focus my research on what I view as two distinct time periods in the history of Iranian cinema. The film of the late Pahlavi era provides a baseline with which to analyze the changes in Iranian society after the 1979 revolution. As such, it is important to understand how masculinity functioned in this time period in order to grasp the changes that were to come. The film of the years immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, in which Iran turned its back on the Western world and asserted a distinctly Islamist political orientation on the international stage would, in theory, differ in its portrayal of men and masculinity from the Pahlavi era against which it rebels. By comparing these two contrasting eras, one following directly after the other, I hope to shed light upon the effects of the 1979 Islamic Revolution on gender norms and idealized conceptions of masculinity in Iran.

In choosing only two films from each time period, I have had to be selective in which films I feel would provide the most valuable information for my analysis of masculinity in Iranian cinema over time. Primarily, I looked for films that attempt to depict life in Iran with some degree of realism. Heavily metaphorical or stylistic films, like Mehrjui’s *The Cow* (1969) and Makhmalbaf’s *The Cyclist* (1987) were excluded from my analysis. I still want to focus on fictional films, and so I excluded documentaries and biographies from my study. Additionally, because I want to understand the Iranian national consciousness from an official perspective, I chose films that were screened in Iranian cinemas and

therefore made it past government censors. I have not included films that were banned even for a time in Iran, including *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (Bayzai, 1986) and *Hajji Washington* (Hatami, 1998). Furthermore, I excluded any Persian-language or Iranian-made films that are not set in Iran, such as *Turtles Can Fly* (Ghobadi, 2004). This left me with a narrower set of films from which to choose, but I still had to exclude several options. At this stage of my search, I focused on films that had prominent male protagonists. This excluded Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), Majidi's *Baran* (2001), and Farhadi's *About Elly* (2009), among others. At the end of this process, I was left with Iranian-made feature films set in Iran that attempt to depict the everyday life of men and boys. Where there were more than two films that fit this category in either era, I chose the most popular ones among Iranian cinemagoers.

My list of films to watch for this study is as follows: from the late Pahlavi era, I have chosen *Qeysar* (Kimiiai, 1969) and *Gozareh* (Kiarostami, 1977), and from the 1980s and early 90s, I have chosen *Marriage of the Blessed* (1989) and *Hamoun* (Mehrbui, 1990). From these films, I will tease out common themes in the popular depiction of masculinity in both the pre- and post-revolutionary eras of Iranian cinema. In order to do this, I will watch for the three variables I have discussed above—class differences and religious piety, male-female sexual dynamics, and age differences among men.

In addition to these three main variables, I will pay close attention to what happens to men and boys in relation to the following categories: place of birth (urban/rural), place of residence (urban/rural), age, occupation, military

service (veteran/not veteran), social class, level of religiosity (devout/secular), marital status (married/unmarried/divorced/ widower), health status, and parenthood status (father/childless). In this way, I intend to create a profile for each major male character in these films in an attempt to understand his background and gain insight into the motivations for his actions. This will result in the compilation of several “types” of Iranian man that will shed light on the popular conception of masculinity in each time period.

Similarly, in creating profiles for each major male character, I will also pay attention to his sexuality and relationship with women and girls. Especially in the post-revolutionary era when the sexes are so strictly separated from each other, understanding a male character's relationship with the members of the opposite sex will shed light not only upon his personal relationship with women but will also provide information on the “type” of Iranian man he represents. Categories and tropes that I will look for in this section include: relationship with mother, relationship with father, relationship with children, relationship with wife/fiancé, aggressiveness towards women, aggressiveness towards other men, passivity towards women, passivity towards men, flirtatiousness, and other expressions of sexuality or virility.

Finally, I will consider the political implications of masculinity in both eras of Iranian film. Whether as the model for the ideal family, a metaphor for the Iranian fatherland, or as a heroic martyr of the revolution, manhood in all eras of Iranian film is inherently entwined with the politics of the time. Tropes I will look for in this section include: men's roles in service to the state, characteristics of the “ideal Iranian

man,” which men are “successful” and why, which men are “heroes” and why, and issues of crime and punishment.

MEN IN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY IRANIAN CINEMA

I will begin my analysis by discussing two films from pre-revolutionary Iran. It is important to understand these films as a baseline for the rest of my analysis, as post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is both a continuation of and reaction to the themes present in the films from the late Pahlavi era. I will give a brief synopsis of each film, followed by a discussion of the typology of Iranian men in the film of this period, expressions of sexuality and virility, and political implications in relation to the three main variables I have discussed above—social class and its relation to religious piety, male-female sexual dynamics, and age discrepancies between men.

Qeysar (1969)

Qeysar is the story of a young man's quest to avenge his sister's honor after she is raped by three brothers and commits suicide in shame. This drama film follows



Courtesy: Film Society

Behrouz Vossoughi, one of the most famous Iranian actors of the time, as Qeyzar—the brooding hero. He comes into conflict with several characters at various points in his quest, most notably with Mansour Ab-Mangol—one of the men responsible for his sister’s rape—and with his uncle, a cautious and reserved older man who advises his nephew to refrain from violence. In the end, Qeyzar succeeds in killing all three brothers responsible for the death of his sister but suffers a life-threatening stab wound at the hands of Mansour and is captured by the police in a dramatic end to this story.

Gozareh (The Report) (1977)

This film follows the story of one middle-class Iranian family on the cusp of the 1979 revolution; it is a bitter portrait of modern Iranian life among the wealthy, Westernized elite. The protagonist of this film is a morally flawed tax collection official by the name of Mohammad Firouzkoui. After a dispute with an older gentleman from rural Iran accusing him of taking bribes, Mohammad is laid off from his



Courtesy: Filmoteca

government job and this causes conflict with his family. Mohammad has a wife named Azam and a very young daughter at home. The narrative follows the daily life of this small family through various arguments and internal struggles, eventually ending with Azam attempting suicide and Mohammad spending the night at a hospital by her side.

There are a few distinct types of pre-revolutionary Iranian man that emerge after viewing these two films. They can be broken down into three major categories: the brooding anti-hero; the older, socially conservative father figure; and the sexually virile foil. Both Qeyzar and Mohammad Firouzkoui fall under the category of the brooding anti-hero. Despite their obvious character flaws—Qeyzar openly drinks alcohol and frequents bars while Mohammad gambles and accepts bribes at work—they are portrayed in a sympathetic light in their interactions with women and girls. Qeyzar’s sense of duty to avenge his sister’s honor implies that his masculinity is inherently tied to female chastity and macho displays of violence. He identifies himself as a *pahlavaan* (a “champion” or “hero”) in an argument with his older uncle, justifying his noble quest. Similarly, though he is portrayed as a greedy scoundrel at work or a liar and a cheat in his marriage, Mohammad is generally a protective and loving father. When he takes his daughter with him to a bar—normally not something a good father would do—he hides the fact that he is drinking alcohol from her and brings her a sandwich to eat in the car while she waits for him. The protagonists of these two films follow Mirbakhtyar’s (2006: 98–99) model of pre-revolutionary anti-heroes, stuck in conflict between their internal desires and the existing socio-political system in which they live. Qeyzar seeks revenge for his sister’s death while Mohammad seeks self-

fulfillment in a loveless marriage.

The second important type of pre-revolutionary Iranian man is the older, socially conservative father figure. In *Qeyzar* this model can be seen in Qeyzar’s uncle, while in *Gozareh* the older man who accuses Mohammad of bribery falls into this category. In contrast to the hot-blooded Qeyzar, the young man’s middle-aged uncle serves as a wise, restrained foil to his nephew’s youthful masculinity. Upon reading the news that his niece has committed suicide after being raped in a note she has left, he refrains from telling his sister—the girl’s mother—what truly happened to her daughter, saying, “It’s good that she left this world.” He believes that the older woman should not be exposed to the horrible truth, stoically refusing to answer her pleas for more information. Furthermore, he expresses a different form of masculinity than Qeyzar when he criticizes his nephew for setting out on a killing spree to avenge his sister. He urges the young man to respect the honor of his elders and not to worry his mother by embarking on a dangerous quest. In an argument with Qeyzar, he calls him young and thoughtless (“*to javaan-i! bifekr-i!*”). Qeyzar’s uncle defends himself from Qeyzar’s criticism by saying, “The older you get, the closer to God.” It is clear, then, that the two central male characters of this film have vastly different notions of what it means to be a man and what type of behavior manhood entails.

Similarly, one of Mohammad’s elderly clients accuses him of accepting bribes and emerges as a father figure, attempting to enforce traditional social norms. This man speaks with a rural accent and unsuccessfully appeals to the traditional morality of the young men who work in the tax collection office. Outraged at Mohammad’s attempt at bribery, he shouts, “Aren’t you ashamed, young man?” He

then appeals to a perceived common identity, saying, “We’re all Muslims, aren’t we?” He explains that he is happy paying his taxes because the government provides service to the poor, but corruption enrages him because money from bribes only go to the one who accepts them. After Mostapha’s plea that Mohammad has a wife and children to worry about at home, the man retorts that “these kind of people don’t spend money on their family.” As we have seen with Qeyzar, there is a distinct conflict between the morality expressed by older men and that of younger men. Class differences also play into this exchange regarding proper manly behavior, with the lower-class older man calling upon a perceived common religious identity when disputing with the higher-class younger men in the tax office.

The third type of man in this era of Iranian cinema is the sexually virile foil, providing a contrasting model of male-female sexual dynamics than the anti-hero. While Qeyzar and Mohammad have some redeeming qualities, their promiscuous counterparts do not. Mansour Ab-Mangol, Qeyzar’s enemy and one of his sister’s rapists, is sneaky and lurks in the shadows—he runs from his enemy rather than confronting him directly. He refuses to admit wrongdoing when he is confronted at the beginning of the film by Qeyzar’s younger brother, whom he proceeds to kill. Mansour rapes Qeyzar’s sister, setting the long string of events into motion that lead to his death. Mansour is the opposite of the ideal Iranian man—the audience is meant to despise him for his violation of female chastity and Qeyzar righteously kills him in the final scene of the film. Not quite so obviously flawed, Mohammad’s friend Mostapha encourages him to go out drinking with some of their coworkers, thereby encouraging Mohammad’s infidelity. He spends

time with prostitutes, drinks alcohol, and gambles his money away at casinos and encourages Mohammad to do so as well. Mostapha’s bachelor status allows him to act out while Mohammad is punished in his home life for doing similar actions.

While idealized men in these films do not always treat women with respect, with Qeyzar ignoring his mother’s warnings against his murderous quest and Mohammad cheating on and beating his wife, ideal forms of masculinity in the pre-revolutionary era of Iranian film are generally associated with sexual fidelity and equitable treatment of women and girls. Older men attempt to reign in the reckless virility of younger men, as female chastity is associated with family honor. The men who do not treat women with respect, especially Mansour but also Mohammad, are punished for their action—Mansour is murdered while Mohammad loses his job, loses face, and is forced to take his wife to the hospital after she attempts suicide. In general, then, masculine models of behavior parallel Naficy’s (2011: 289) two-fold model of femininity: the men who respect women in the private sphere and do not succumb to the temptations of corrupt women in the public sphere are successful, while the men who do not respect female chastity or who engage with corrupt women are not successful.

Politically, men are idealized for their willingness to stand up for their personal morality against a perceivably unjust society. Qeyzar emerges as the hero despite warnings from his mother and uncle not to embark on his quest. The elderly client at Mohammad’s office stands up for his rights in the face of government extortion and successfully achieves his goal of suspending the younger man from his job. This fits in with Mirbakhtyar (2006: 99) and Sadr’s (2006: 1) model of men as “rebellious characters”

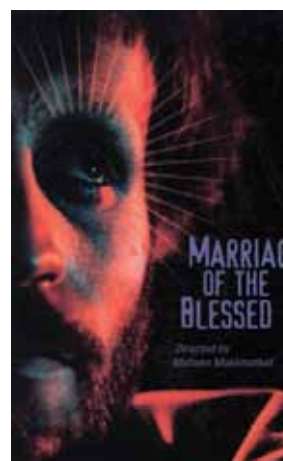
who served as instructive models to the Iranian theatergoing public. These anti-establishment political models, and a great deal of public discontent, led to the events of the 1979 revolution.

MEN IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRANIAN CINEMA

In post-revolutionary Iranian film, one witnesses both a distinct break from previous cinematic codes as well as a great deal of continuity in the tropes filmmakers employ. Through discussion of the themes present in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, one can begin to understand the effect the revolution had on the representation of masculinity on screen.

Marriage of the Blessed (1989)

This film follows the story of a soldier, Haji Agha Pakdel, returned home from the brutal Iran-Iraq war and his struggle to re-adapt to civilian life. He battles post-traumatic stress disorder and attempts to reintegrate into a society that does not conform to his idealistic morals. After returning home from the hospital to his wealthy fiancée (Mehri) and his job as a photojournalist, he begins to notice that the revolutionary ideals he fought so hard to defend in the



Courtesy: Firouzan

war with Iraq are not being practiced by many Iranians on the homefront. During his wedding, he attacks the decadence of the elite society and runs away from his privileged life to live homeless on the street. The film closes as a photojournalist attempts to take a photo of him living in a slum, with Haji rebuffing the camera.

Hamoun (1990)

This film follows the story of Hamid Hamoun, a married PhD student who struggles to balance his work life with his home life. His wife, Mahshid, is an aspiring painter who comes from a wealthy family. Mahshid wants to divorce Hamid and both hire lawyers to argue their respective cases in court. Through a complicated series of flashbacks and dream sequences, the viewer of this film begins to understand the beginnings of Hamid and Mahshid's



Courtesy: IMDb

complex relationship. Hamid sets out on a quest to reunite with his spiritual mentor and old friend Ali, but cannot find him. Hamid is obsessed with religion and the story of Abraham's "divine madness" in his love for God and willingness to sacrifice his own son—he conflates his love for Mahshid with Abraham's

love for Isaac. After an unsuccessful attempt to shoot Mahshid with a shotgun, Hamid runs into the ocean in a fit of madness and the film drifts off in a dream sequence where he is rescued by Ali and Mahshid and they throw a party on the beach.

Iranian men in post-revolutionary cinema can be categorized into several broad categories. These include: the crazed, idealistic young man; the wealthy older foil; and the just-out-of-reach spiritual mentor. The main characters in both of the films included in this story, Haji Agha and Hamid, fall into the category of the idealistic young man. Haji Agha Pakdel, whose name roughly translates as "clean-hearted man who has made the Hajj pilgrimage," suffers from psychological trauma and struggles to reconcile his revolutionary ideals with everyday Iranian life. When he returns from the hospital after being injured in the war, his doctor advises him not to watch films about tragedies in other parts of the world so as not to trigger any painful memories. Haji goes against this advice and watches news reports about the war in Lebanon and famines in Africa, saying, "the oppressors have returned" and "it is like before the revolution." His fiancée Mehri worries about him, telling him, "You're torturing yourself. So what if the rich are returning? You do not represent the nation!" Despite this, it is clear that this is exactly how Haji sees himself—as the embodiment of the ideal revolutionary martyr. He refuses to develop film that depicts uncovered women at his job, for example, and is obsessed with photographing the poor and dispossessed in his journalistic career. Ironically, as he and Mehri go out one night on a photo-shoot, they are arrested by the Basij (morality police) and must go to the police station to prove they have a government permit to photograph.

It seems that even the most idealistic young revolutionary cannot escape government harassment.

Similarly, Hamid is portrayed as a crazed academic, obsessed with his work and unconcerned with his family. Mahshid accuses him of being "obsessed with himself," unconcerned with her and their daughter. Hamid protests this notion, contending that he is "weak in the face of power," going on to name his "mother, father, country, and Mahshid" as the powerful forces that influence the course of his life. When he listens to Mahshid describe to her psychologist her marital struggles with him, Hamid reminds himself that "her bills break my back" —who is she to complain when he has to deal with the economic problems of the family? Furthermore, Hamid's character flaws are consistently described as being common to all Iranian men. Mahshid's psychologist comforts her that "it's common to all Iranian men to terrorize." Mahshid's mother, in a confrontation with Hamid about why he refuses to grant her daughter a divorce, says "you're like all men —egotistical and abusive." Hamid is not alone in his self-obsession and disregard for others.

Both Haji Agha and Hamid come into conflict with older men who are generally wealthier and wiser than their younger counterparts. Mehri's wealthy father stands in sharp contrast to Haji's idealistic naiveté. Though he admires aspects of Haji's character, he does not consider him a suitable match for his daughter. He thinks he is crazy and unable to provide economically for his daughter due to his mentally unstable state, saying "I love Haji like a son, but he cannot work." He would rather Mehri marry one of the many rich suitors he has lined up for her, but he accepts his daughter's choice when she emphasizes that only Haji can make her happy. Haji does not have a fond impression

of this future father-in-law, telling Mehri that “your father will defeat the revolution from the inside.” Because he is a wealthy businessman, Haji doubts his concern for social justice and therefore does not respect him. As we have seen in the previous two films, there is a sharp contrast between the ideals and conceptions of masculinity embodied by younger men versus older men in this film. Hamid’s lawyer also provides an older, wiser foil to his character. When advising him to go through with his divorce, the lawyer says to Hamid, “You sold yourself to get rich. You chose a beauty, she no longer wants you. Better off with a monkey.” The lawyer has no time for sentimentality and is only concerned with practical matters in regards to Hamid’s marital situation. He advises his younger client to “divorce her [Mahshid],” for she “has the upper hand.” Because Mahshid comes from a wealthy family and Hamid can only rely upon his academic credentials, his lawyer tells him to get out of this emasculating situation and move on to a more comfortable family life as a divorced man.

The third type of man common to both films is the elusive spiritual mentor to the main character. For Haji Agha, he is his own spiritual mentor in that he cannot seem to live up to the high revolutionary ideals he sets for himself. People both respect and pity Haji for his inability to distinguish between idealism and the reality of everyday life. Mehri’s brother admires him when he says, “Brother Haji’s camera is the anxious eye of the revolution.” When discussing his daughter’s impending marriage, Mehri’s father states his admiration for his future son-in-law’s military service and idealism. Haji is criticized, however, for his extreme devotion to his ideals. One of Mehri’s friends visits a medicine woman to buy a charm for her friend, saying she is “going

to marry a nitwit.” Mehri herself accuses her fiancé of “enjoying acting the martyr.” Haji alienates those around him with his erratic and strange behavior, especially during his wedding speech. Rather than thank his guests for coming, he uses this opportunity to decry the opulence of the Iranian upper class. He begins to chant — “Eat the food robbed from the poor. Robbed food is delicious! Robbed food is delicious!” (*haraam-khori khoshmaze ast!*). After this stunt, he is forcibly taken from the microphone and runs away to live in poverty.

On the contrary, Hamid seeks spiritual guidance from two mentors—the prophet Abraham and an old friend named Ali. As he writes his PhD dissertation on the subject of “Abraham’s love and faith,” he also attempts to emulate the life of the ancient prophet. He says at one point, “one must be like Abraham—willing to destroy one’s life to regain her [Mahshid].” Hamid’s search for spiritual guidance in the life of the prophet Abraham also leads him to seek out his old mentor Ali. Ali is an elusive character in this film—he is only seen in passing or in dream sequences and does not speak to Hamid directly. Ali is a middle-aged to older man who seems to possess some sort of mystical knowledge that Hamid finds enticing. As Ali searches for his children throughout the film, he evades Hamid’s attempts to find him. At the end of this film, it is Ali who rescues Hamid from the ocean in his dream and joins him for a party on the beach along with other important people in the younger man’s life. Though Hamid seeks the advice of Ali and comes very close to meeting with his long-lost mentor on several occasions, it is only in his mind that he actually finds the older man and talks with him.

Following the revolution and its new set of morals, obvious expressions of sexuality are largely

absent in both of the films from this period. Male-female dynamics are largely restricted to the home and the marital relationship; Haji Agha and Hamid are not tempted to cheat on their wives and fiancées with women in bars and teahouses. Rather, their relationship struggles emerge from both men’s internal discontent and dissatisfaction. Hamid’s self-obsession drives Mahshid away, while Haji Agha’s obsession with living out the ideals of the revolution drive him from mainstream society completely. On the spectrum of potent virility to academic effeminacy that Hopkins (2006) discusses, both protagonists from the post-revolutionary era tend heavily toward the latter.

Politically, both films fall in line with the revolution’s emphases upon anti-Westernization, populism, and elevation of the status of religion in everyday life. Both Haji Agha and Hamid are deeply religious, almost to the point of insanity. They both search for guidance in the ideals of Shia Islam—especially self-sacrifice and martyrdom. Haji Agha is disgusted by the amount of class distinction that still exists in the post-revolutionary era, using his wedding as a pulpit from which to decry the decadence of his future father-in-law’s lifestyle. Hamid is also troubled by class differences, with many of the arguments he has with his wife centering on money and finances. In the post-revolutionary era, unsurprisingly, the highly religious lower class is idealized while the secular upper classes are decried and protested against by the main characters in both films.

DISCUSSION

In both the pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian films I have analyzed, a constant trend remains the conflict between young and old men regarding proper masculine behavior. In all

four films, older men constantly criticize their younger counterparts for not behaving in traditionally masculine ways. Qeyzar's uncle criticizes his nephew for his hot-blooded pursuit of revenge while, in *Marriage of the Blessed*, Mehri's father finds Haji Agha unsuitable to marry his daughter due in part to his unwavering devotion to revolutionary ideals. Older men respect the boundaries society has placed upon their behavior while younger men appear to be motivated primarily from an inner sense of what's right, regardless of what society has to say. In *Gozaresh*, Mohammad feels entitled to accept bribes for his own personal benefit while Hamoun attempts to shoot his wife in emulation of the prophetic command to "destroy one's life in order to regain it"—both in clear violation of social and legal norms.

Similarly, social class creates conflict among the men in the films included in this study. In *Gozaresh*, the elderly customer of the tax office is outraged that all of the younger men in the office are defending the practice of bribery. In *Marriage of the Blessed*, Haji Agha is outraged at the social inequity that still pervades post-revolutionary Iranian society and blames the rich for "defeating the revolution from within." In both *Marriage of the Blessed* and *Hamoun*, the main characters' fathers-in-law disapprove of them because they come from a lower social class than the women they wish to marry. The men who occupy the upper classes of Iranian society are depicted as uninterested in the fate of the lower classes and seek to maintain the status of their families by opposing their daughters' marriages to men of lower classes. While younger men generally occupy the upper classes in the pre-revolutionary films and older men the lower classes, the opposite is true for post-revolutionary films.

Despite this shift in demographics, the class conflict remains constant in both eras of Iranian cinema.

The instructive nature of Iranian cinema is another theme that has remained constant in post-revolutionary films. Despite vastly different socio-political conditions, Iranian filmmakers continue to provide behavioral models in their films after which the Iranian public can model themselves. Just as one could identify with the urge for revenge after a great injustice, as in *Qeyzar*, or the strained family dynamics present in *Gozaresh*, one can also identify with Haji Agha's frustrated revolutionary fervor and Hamid's quest for self-fulfillment and greater meaning in life. While these models may suggest "naïve solutions" (Sadr 2006: 1), they also represent the dominant social concerns of the time and reflect a range of broader social trends that dominated the Iranian national consciousness following the 1979 revolution.

Haji Agha, in his war-hardened, mentally unstable state, acts not just as a model for the reaction to the harsh realities of the post-revolutionary era and the brutality of the Iran-Iraq war, he forces the audience to question the morality of the revolution and the war themselves. If a pious, talented young man such as Haji Agha can be tainted so severely by war and revolutionary fervor, how much more so the masses of less-gifted and less-ideological young Iranian men of the time? In many ways, Hamid is a model of the ideal Iranian man of the post-revolutionary era—he studies diligently and engages in a quest for spiritual meaning. However, he too is deeply flawed. If such a man—who, on the surface, is perfectly admirable—can maintain such deep character flaws as Hamid's self-obsession and disregard for his family, where should the masses of

young Iranians look to find a proper role model? The simplistic good-versus-evil dynamic one observes in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema is completely shattered in the post-revolutionary era.

Despite the various continuities one can observe in both eras of Iranian film, one major difference is the breakdown of simplistic conceptions of masculinity in the post-revolutionary era. Qeyzar is potently masculine and, despite a few minor character flaws, generally heroic in his cinematic portrayal. With Mohammad's character, one can begin to observe the complication of the simplistic hero-villain dynamic. However, he is still generally successful in his family life; despite her suicide attempt, his wife survives and the two continue to raise their daughter together. Haji Agha and Hamoun are more nuanced characters—both attempt to maintain their families while struggling with mental illness. While the pre-revolutionary model of Iranian manhood appears to be either potently masculine or strikingly impotent, the post-revolutionary one allows for more complexity.

This complication of the hero-villain dichotomy reflects a changing understanding of male-female sexual dynamics in the post-revolutionary era. In the pre-revolutionary era, women were either chaste and motherly or promiscuous and objectified (Naficy 2011: 289). In the post-revolutionary era, one can begin to see a shift in gender norms that would become more prevalent in the late 1980s (Naficy 2012: 111-135). As women move to the foreground of Iranian cinema, they become increasing more complex characters. Because of the symbiotic relationship that exists between the sexes in any patriarchy, this also means that men's portrayals also

become more complex and nuanced. While the pre-revolutionary era consisted mainly of macho men and damsels in distress as well as adulterous husbands and desperate housewives, the post-revolutionary model of gender relations consists of empowered women and their impotent, fanatical husbands.

Considering the Islamic nature of the 1979 revolution, it is no surprise that conceptions of religious piety and their association with social classes underwent a significant shift in the post-revolutionary era. Whereas religiosity is mainly associated with the powerless lower classes in the pre-revolutionary era, as exemplified by the incident between Mohammad and his elderly customer, religious piety is mainly associated with heroic men and is admired by members of the upper class in the post-revolutionary era. Although Haji Agha himself comes from a lower class background, his future father-in-law (somewhat begrudgingly) admires him for his revolutionary zeal. Hamid has also managed to marry a woman of a higher social class, yet still he is obsessed with religion and martyrdom. This trend of idealization of religious fervor makes sense in light of the fact that the new government promotes and maintains Islamism as the basis of its identity. Any film produced in this era cannot be too critical of religion for fear of censorship.

In general, then, representations of masculinity in the post-revolutionary era differ from those of

femininity in several important ways. Whereas women's portrayals in Iranian film from the 1960s through the 1980s remain defined by their subordination to men, cinematic portrayals of men in Iranian cinema of the same time period are not defined by their relation to women so much as they are to broader social changes. Men become more complex characters after the revolution, as they must deal with an entirely new set of socio-political circumstances. No longer brooding anti-heroes acting in defiance of government oppression, men in the post-revolutionary era reflect a new national turn inward. These men seek self-fulfillment and the realization of their ideological goals, just as the revolutionary government struggles to build a new state after the collapse of the old regime. For men, who have always been more politically empowered than women in Iran, the revolution resulted in a complete shift in their worldview and this shift is reflected in the cinema of the period.

CONCLUSION

While this research sheds light upon the portrayal of masculinity in the films I have analyzed above, this study should not be used to draw broad conclusions about masculinity as portrayed in the whole of Iranian cinema or Iranian society writ large. I conceive of these films as brief snapshots into the consciousness of each individual filmmaker who produced them, inevitably recreating—on some level—the

ideals of masculinity and manhood he encounters in his daily life in Iran. In this way, these films can serve as microcosms of Iranian conceptions of masculinity, but they are no more than this.

Despite this caveat, there are a few words to be said about general trends observable in the forms of masculinity depicted in pre-revolutionary Iranian films as compared to post-revolutionary ones, as discussed above. Gender norms and conceptions of masculinity in Iranian cinema are very large topics and further research is needed to determine an accurate and nuanced archaeology of the “ideal Iranian man” across the history of Iranian film. It is the hope of this researcher that this study can serve as a basis for such a long-term project. Future avenues of research must include a more comprehensive survey of Iranian cinema, not just in the time period addressed but also in the number of films analyzed. It would be very interesting to see whether the trends discussed in this paper hold true for films produced in the 1990s and beyond, especially as the corpus of Iranian cinema constantly expands in size and quality of production.

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